

Let It Bleed

The Rolling Stones were bleeding when they gathered at Olympic Studios on November 16, 1968 to begin recording their latest album. It would take 384 days to give birth to this album. In September, Mick Jagger had begun filming *Performance* where he played Turner to Anita Pallenberg's Pherber. Jagger and Pallenberg engaged in a torrid affair during the filming. In the process they caused no end of anguish to Keith Richards, Mick's best friend and Anita's partner, and to Marianne Faithfull, Mick's partner and Anita's best friend. The affair could easily have destroyed the Rolling Stones had Richards not decided to avoid a confrontation and thereby enable the band to go on making music. But Richards bled and some have suggested he first began using heroin around that time to blot out his pain. If you listen carefully, you can hear Keith bleeding through the tracks of this album.

The *Let It Bleed* album cover art is largely the product of one man and his friendship with Keith Richards. The cover was wonderfully and weirdly congruent with the album title when that title was *Automatic Changer*. In 1969 and even today it would be/is incongruous with the title, unless you are bent on seeing meaning in everything that is done to create an album. Sometimes a surreal automatic changer is just an automatic changer and not a depiction of the many delicately balanced forces of 1960s society on the front cover and their destruction on the back cover. Already I digress, let's back up and start at the beginning.

"Hard Knox and Durty Sox" is the working title that Keith Richards had in mind while putting this album together. In June, 1969 the Stones announced they would be releasing two new albums that year, one, entitled *Sticky Fingers*, in September and another in December. In the July 26, 1969 issue of DISC magazine Keith talked about the new album. DISC said, "Keith says he has enjoyed making this new LP much more than *Beggars Banquet*; working with new Stone, Mick Taylor, has been one factor. Taylor's joining the band has resulted in more energetic music, according to Richards, although he only appears on three tracks on the forthcoming LP to be titled: *Sticky Fingers*". But *Sticky Fingers* would not be first to the finish line.

On January 1, 1969 Mick Jagger famously contacted M.C. Escher to request artwork on an album cover and was dissed over the faux pas of addressing Escher by his first name, Maurits. This request has at times been mistakenly associated with the *Let It Bleed* album when in fact it was for *Through the Past Darkly*. On April 21, 1969, Jagger wrote to Andy Warhol clearly requesting his work on the same compilation album. One report has Warhol sending the Stones an idea for *Sticky Fingers/Automatic*

Dear Sir [addressed to Mr. Peter Swales],

Some days ago I received a letter from Mr. Jagger asking me to design a picture or to place at his disposal unpublished work to reproduce on the cover-sleeve for an LP record.

My answer to both questions must be no, as I want to devote all my time and attention to the many commitments I made; I cannot possibly accept any further assignments or spend any time on publicity.

By the way, please tell Mr. Jagger I am not Maurits to him, but
Very sincerely,
M. C. Escher.

Changer/Let It Bleed having a vinyl record in girls' panties inside cutoff Levi's. These materials were supposedly misplaced by Stones' office staff. Warhol eventually provided the concept for the actual *Sticky Fingers* album. The timing of those letters seems to have confused several writers into thinking they were for *Let It Bleed*.

At some point after Keith's July interview the album's working title changed to *Automatic Changer*, influenced by a bit of record playing technology first introduced in 1927. The Rolling Stones were becoming rather enlightened patrons of album cover art design by the late 1960s. It was around the time of the name change that Keith approached his good friend Robert Brownjohn (BJ) to design the cover. Brownjohn said yes. Influenced by the working title of the album, Brownjohn envisioned a surreal assortment of circular objects — a plate, film can, clock face, pizza, tire and wedding cake with the band on top — stacked above a vinyl LP as if they were on one of the autochanger mechanisms that enabled record players to play numerous albums without stopping. Like much of BJ's work, the *Let It*

Bleed sculpture would be a model of design ingenuity.

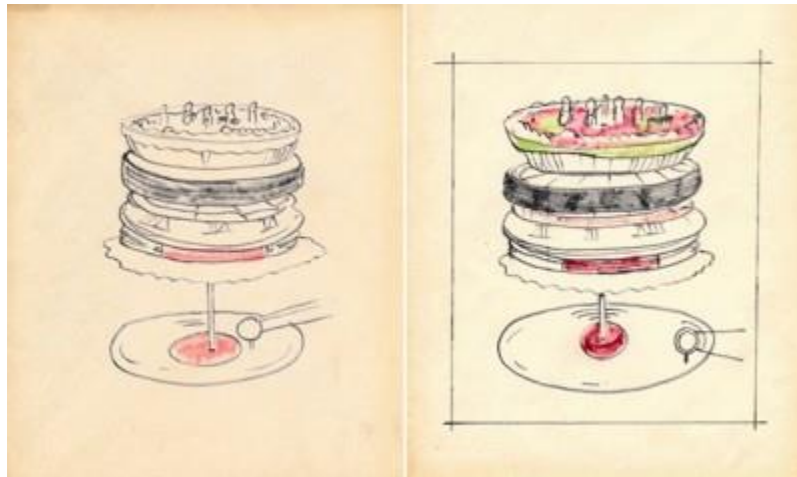
Robert Brownjohn was an American graphic designer known for blending formal graphic design concepts with wit and 1960s pop culture. He is best known for his motion picture title sequences, especially *From Russia with Love* and *Goldfinger*.

Brownjohn's daughter, Eliza, provides some perspective on BJ's vision for the sculpture. Her father was born in New York City, and she described him as somebody who just loved collecting stuff off the streets, nails, signs, all sorts of things. "He decorated the walls of our living room with all these fabulous signs that he just found on the streets. He loved doing that. And it was kind of that take on *Let It Bleed*. The layers were just all things that he thought would be right in there, as somebody who collected that kind of

stuff. An old tire, bicycle tire, you know? An old clock face, you know. He threw in the pizza because, of course, he came from New York...so that is basically how he constructed the whole thing."

On Thursday Aug 21, 1969 BJ showed Keith the following sketches of the cover idea. All the elements of the final cover of *Automatic Changer* were already in place in BJ's mind. BJ would build the sculpture then have it photographed. By the time Brownjohn finished his sculpture the title had been changed because *Let It Bleed* appeared on the film canister and the record label as well as the cover title itself. *Let It Bleed* may be the only album with its title found three times on the cover. The title change, of

course, scrambled the meaning of the sculpture and no shortage of pundits found a deeper meaning for it.



Robert Brownjohn's preliminary sketches of Automatic Changer album cover

Bill Wyman tells us Keith was very receptive to the initial design and BJ planned to shoot it a week later at a total cost of £1,000. This would be the second time the Stones decided not to put a photo of themselves on the cover, *Beggars Banquet* being the first. One of BJ's primary tasks was to find

Interestingly, building/baking a *Let It Bleed* cake is a real thing. See Pinterest for examples under *Let It Bleed* cake or Rolling Stones album cake.

someone to bake the cake that was so central to his concept. For this, he hired Delia Smith, a friend of the photographer, Don McAllester. Smith recalled, "I was working then as a jobbing home economist with a food photographer who shot for commercials and magazines. I'd cook anything they needed. One day they said they wanted

a cake for a Rolling Stones record cover, it was just another job at the time. They wanted it to be very over-the-top and as gaudy as I could make it." The same Delia Smith would go on to become a well-known British cookbook writer and television celebrity. It is not known how much of Brownjohn's budget was spent on the cake.

How would the *Let It Bleed* concept look on the album cover? Tony Palladino, a friend of BJ's fills us in. "We would have a beer and just sit around and think about it, or not think about it. You know the Rolling Stones cover, *Let It Bleed*? With the cake? Put that altogether and destroy it. Fuck it up, you know, fuck it up. I think it shows the anger that he felt at that point in time. It is an interesting image, and destruction was part of that kind of music, but it didn't have the sensitivity that the music contained. I think you could argue with BJ about that particular piece." Dick Fontaine, a producer and another contemporary said, "I remember him doing the Rolling Stones cover, using me as a bit of a sounding board, he was obviously doing that with everybody on the King's Road. He talked about the things he was going to put in it. I think his life was very messy at the time and it was a fair representation of where he was."

BJ was in charge of assembling the sculpture in Don McAllester's studio where it would then be photographed. The sculpture and record arm were set up on a table with a nice piece of paper on it.

Details: When the Rolling Stones recruited you in the early 1960s, you were working as a graphic designer at an advertising agency. What was your work like there?

Charlie Watts: I was very lucky because I went to a very good agency that just employed some of the best, best American designers. A guy who was with us, who was a big influence—and I still see him now in New York—is a man called Bob Gill. Bob brought all these people over, and it was so exciting working with him. It's still exciting to see him now. We would go to lectures with another guy that came over, Robert Brownjohn, he's the one who did—I forgot the name of the record. You know, the one with the cake on it. . .

Details: Let It Bleed.

Charlie Watts: Yeah. He did the cover of that. That's Brownjohn. Brownjohn was a fantastically hip American—we all wanted to be like this and play in jazz clubs. And Bob was another one, and he brought over a crowd of New Yorkers with him. I used to work in the bullpen, they called it. I used to do lettering and things like that. I very quickly realized what a bloody lie it all was—so I just sort of slowly got disillusioned. Not with Bob or with graphic design. I loved that. But I didn't like advertising, and I'm still not very good at self-promotion.

McAllester was present with his assistant Trevor Key. Key tells us that at the assembly and shoot, Brownjohn was apparently never without a can of lager in his hand. Beer was an essential part of his self-designed drug withdrawal program. The finished product is shown below. The sculpture was a simple, yet dazzlingly apt idea, so deftly and wittily executed that it was both striking and memorable. Brownjohn reveled in visual repartee and took pleasure in bewildering others. His sculpture did both. After the album name was changed to *Let It Bleed*, the name change was easily accommodated by adding the title to the film can and the record label.

First, on the imaginary turntable, is an LP with a red label announcing “The Rolling Stones.” The label was special to BJ. Eliza, his daughter says, “He had that label made up specially and it cost a fortune. I remember him saying oh my God it’s a fortune but it’s going to make all the difference. So, BJ had an actual label pressed and printed specifically for the album cover.” The label shows the Stones with Mick Taylor and not Brian who was fired and died during the making of this album. The Stones were bleeding, one might say. If so, let it bleed.



Let It Bleed front cover photograph

Mick Taylor, Bill Wyman, Keith Richards, Mick Jagger, and Charlie Watts are arrayed just below a very long spindle in the center of the label. Next in line on the record changer is a glass cake plate, stacked on top of this is a metal film cannister with red tape and black letters saying "Stones – Let it bleed", suggesting the album title was decided at the time of the shoot. A clockface with Roman numerals, a pizza, a bike tire and the top of a cake are all carefully arranged around the spindle that protrudes from the album. An antique gramophone tone arm, supported by a coil of clay, is perched peculiarly on the LP.

Delia did not know the cake was to grace the cover of the new album of one of the world's leading rock bands. All she was told was that it had to be 'really gaudy'. She obliged and brought a cake festooned with 19 red candied cherries at least partially visible, 13 green candied cherries and 7 yellow candied cherries to McAllester's studio. All the red and green cherries are embedded in a small green icing floret. Columns of dragees separate the green cherries. With a little imagination, a white stage is set off by a multi-pointed star made of lavender icing. On this stage were set tiny models of the Rolling Stones 'performing' on top of the cake. From left to right are Bill, Mick T., Charlie, Mick J., and Keith. She only found out what it was to be used for at the studio. We know the band was BJ's idea but we do not know who placed the band on the cake. As a thank you, Mick Jagger sent her a signed, framed copy of the album, which Delia still treasures today.

Why was the album name changed to *Let It Bleed*? Here is where the fun begins. The most popular theory is this is the Stones' dark version of *Let It Be*. Megalo-maniacal Beatles fans and John Lennon were fond of thinking the Stones liked to mimic the Beatles. One problem with this theory is that *Let It Bleed* was released six months before *Let It Be*. A typical Beatles fan response goes something like this, Jagger knew of the *Let It Be* song (they talked) and may have meant *Let It Bleed* to mock it. Oh yeah, the moon is also made of green cheese.

There is an apocryphal story attributed to the band that goes like this. Keith's fingers began to bleed as he played the same chords on an acoustic guitar for hours while Mick worked with an engineer on the drum track for the song, *Let It Bleed*. The title came from Keith's desire to record his track and, presumably, his attitude about his injury. At least that's the story the band is said to tell.

If you prefer a drug explanation, it has been suggested that "Let It Bleed" is intravenous drug user slang for successfully finding a vein. The syringe plunger is pulled back and if blood appears, this is called letting it bleed. This renders the album a paean to drug use.

The author's favorite explanation based on its sheer imagination is from a Mick Jagger biography. It says, "The very title, *Let It Bleed*, was an echo of Aleister Crowley's so-called sex magic, created by intercourse with a Scarlet Woman during her menstruation." Let it bleed.

Perhaps the most credible story is Keith's. In 1971 he said, "Let it bleed was just one line in that song Mick wrote. It became the title...we just kicked a line out." The only problem with this explanation is *Let It Bleed* does not include the line "let it bleed" anywhere on the album. Want an explanation? Pick your favorite.

What we do know is that even once the title had been changed to *Let It Bleed*, BJ's design was so powerful that the band kept it. It only took a little adaptation. Add the album title to that film cannister and the record label and *Automatic Changer* is now *Let It Bleed*.



Keith, Mick and Allan Steckler examine the Let It Bleed cover proof

Turn the album over and the scene is changed. Let us have a look. Chaos has erupted on the back. The stack of objects has been vandalized. The record is broken and littered with cake, pizza and cake plate debris. All of the mini-musicians have tumbled into the icing, except for Brownjohn's friend Mr. Richards.



Let It Bleed rear cover photograph

The record is broken, two pie slice shapes have been removed from it and the label splits the words "The Rolling Stones," more symbolism or over-active imagination? The tone arm has been detached and is lying on the record surrounded by glass from the cake plate. A slice of what is apparently veggie pizza with a bite taken out of it rests on the label. We see jalapeno pepper and black olive, a piece of green pepper and maybe a cherry tomato on the slice. There is a green candy cherry still nestled in icing on the record. At least four shards of vinyl are visible. The left and leading edges of the cake plate are broken. Debris rests on the record. A piece of film—apparently blank—extends from the canister that looks like it has been pried open with force. The red tape label is detached from the word "Let" onward. The clockface is bent and defaced with black and red markers. The tire rim is visible through a gash in the tire. There is a bent nail (from the Streets of New York?), a red rubber repair patch, a yellow circular dot and a heavy gage gauze bandage on the tire. Spokes are visible where a triangular slice of cake has been removed.

The yellow cake is dense, a small piece rests on the tire. After the carnage 13 red, 5 yellow, and 8 green candies remain, the icing survived largely intact. There looks to be a big piece of innertube patching rubber between the pizza and the tire on the left side of the wrecked changer stack. The spindle is bent, the band is decimated. Bill, Charlie, Mick T. and Mick J. have been toppled. Bill and Mick T. are face down Charlie and Mick are face up. The Brian figurine lies face down “drowning” in icing or is that a flight of this author’s fancy? Keith is still upright and playing (a powerful Stones cliché, he never missed a show) although he has sunk into the icing and cake quite a bit.

Trevor Key said that when the time came to transform the pristine version of the sculpture photographed for the front cover into the scene of destruction on the rear cover BJ volunteered to smash the sculpture with his bare fist. The photographer was horrified, this was a million miles from what the meticulous McAllester had in mind. Fortunately, Don persuaded BJ there was a better way and he and Trevor dismantled the set one tiny piece at a time.



Decca album cover for *Let It Bleed*

The figurines on top of the cake seem to depict the Stones as they were in the early 60s, based on their dress and hairstyles. There seems to have been some effort to represent the figures in an identifiable way. Bill Wyman has a slightly elongated expression and a vertically held guitar. The blond guitar player looks more like Brian than Mick, perhaps some transitional symbolism as Mick Taylor’s face is clearly evident on the record label. If this was intended to be Brian it would create a unique situation for an album to depict two configurations of the band. The drummer is, of course, Charlie because the kit is simple, the figurine looks unamused and it has Charlie’s 60’s hairline. Mick has prominent lips formed in

an “o” with a microphone in his hands. Keith is the dark-haired guitar player. As to what happened to the sculpture, according to BJ’s daughter, it got destroyed and was thrown away after.

What do we make of this destruction? Rollingstone described the scene on that back “as if evidence of the aftermath of a wild party.” One blogspot offered this opinion, “... every decision, every detail was deliberate. And the cover artwork for “Let It Bleed” is no exception. These weren't just random objects strung together to make a pretty nifty design (author’s note: as BJ’s daughter tells us they were). No - these objects meant something to the Stones... in some way, their combination, ...offered a social commentary in its own way. In some way, the cake, the plates, the tape canister, the clock face, the pizza, the tire and the figurines all offer some sort of insight into the chaotic world of the sixties and the perhaps even more chaotic musical minds of The Rolling Stones.”

Many have sought to make the album cover a metaphor for the sixties. “Society was going down. Society was in disarray. Society was one finger-tap away from complete ruin. And the Stones saw it coming; in fact, they were warning against it. They were saying, in their own way, ‘Listen people... the cake, the pizza, the clock, the tire, the pleasure-seeking, the consumerism, the technology... it's all going to cave in. The facade isn't going to last. The balancing act is over’.”

Check the Internet and you can find some quite articulate interpretations of what the Stones were trying to say with their artwork on *Let It Bleed*. It seems an argument could be made that the artwork said more about Brownjohn and his own state of mind and the Stones liked the result. Brownjohn was still at the height of his fame when he died of a heart attack in August 1970 from the long-term effects of drug abuse. Let it bleed.

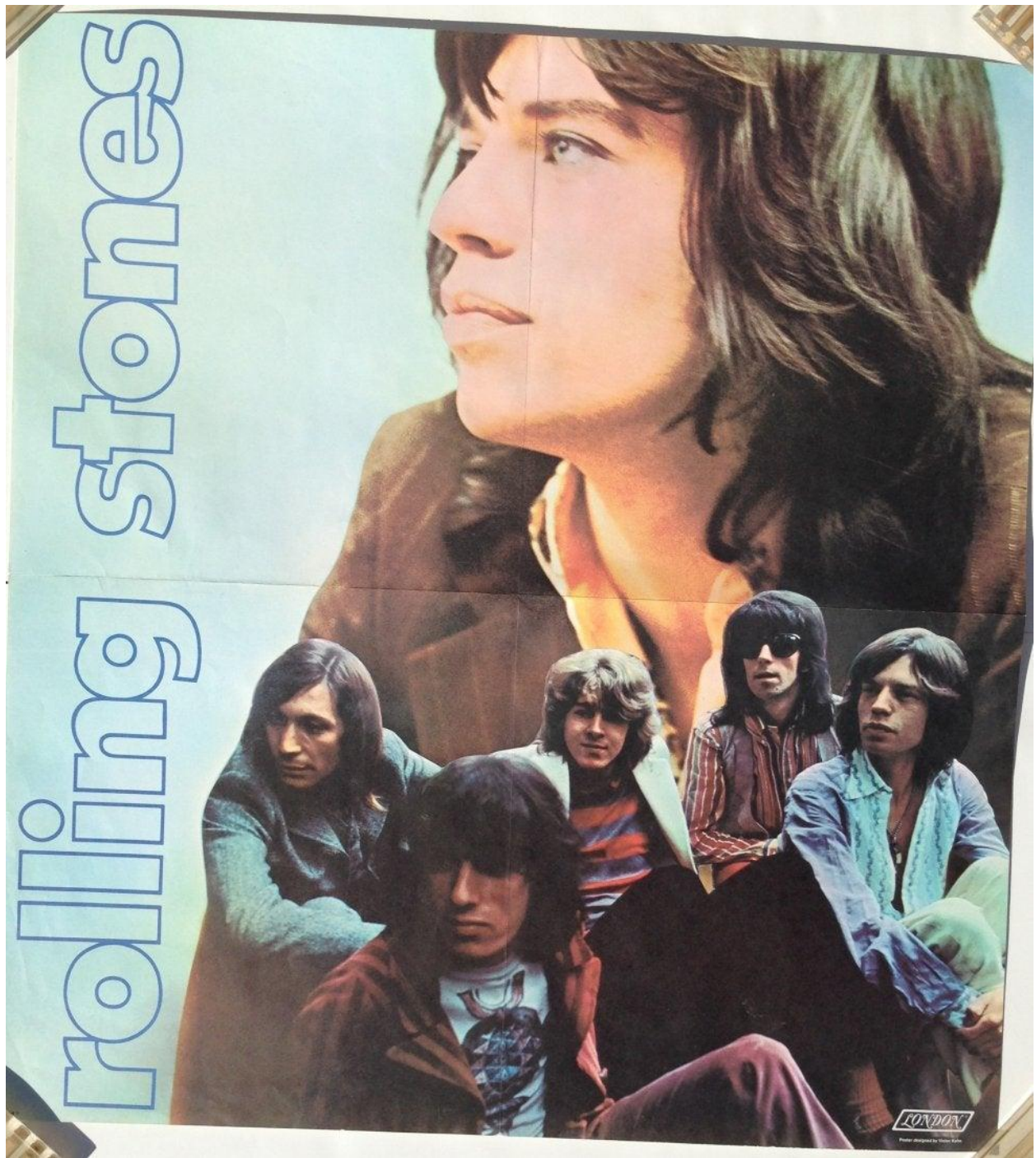
BJ’s daughter, Eliza, says, ““His whole concept really was, it was that period in 1969 when everything was... just up or down, craziness you know. Woodstock, the this, the that, establishment vs. the young people, you know. And what he did was, the Stones, the little miniatures on the front album cover they were just doing [their thing] you know and on the back they were completely destroyed and that was the message of the time, you know when everything was getting smashed up. That’s how the world was, how everyone was looking at it...And that was basically the concept, the only one who survived the smashing on the back was Keith Richards.”

With the 1967 drug busts, the sexual tension around Anita Pallenberg’s Stones-partnering, the impending break with long-time manager Andrew Loog Oldham, the slow departure and sudden death of Brian Jones, and the addition of Mick Taylor, these were turbulent times for the Stones. *Let It Bleed*, released one day before the concert at Altamont was the curtain raiser for the final denouement of the 1960s.

Victor Kahn, a 26-year old New York graphic artist designed the album packaging for Alan Steckler, the graphics VP for ABKCO. When Kahn wrote the words for the liner sleeve he chose to credit the artists on the recording sessions and not just the Stones playing the instruments. Unfortunately, the credit list contains several errors. Nanette Workman is called Nanette Newman. The line “George Chkiantz Alias Irish O’Duffy” conflates “Irish” Alan O’Duffy and George Chkiantz. The inner sleeve also includes the set list and the advice that, “THIS RECORD NEEDS TO BE PLAYED LOUD.” Kahn was told to include the phrase, “HARD KNOX AND DURTY SOX” a name the project began with, at the top of the liner credits. Kahn designed the poster by taking a Hyde Park photo of the five “new” Stones, stripping them out of the photo and dropping it on top of an old never published picture of Mick Jagger that Kahn happened

to have. Kahn, who laid out the back cover of the album as well, did not list the song titles in the order they are found on the record. This was for aesthetic reasons. "I [did] it that way to get the right- and left-hand margins perfectly even. Just [to show] the songs on there, not necessarily the order, because I put the correct order on the inner sleeve."

Kahn says, "the name Automatic Changer never reached me or anybody that I knew in the New York office. The original photo that I cropped the cover image from even went as far as having a ball of clay holding the old gramophone record arm and needle that you see in part of the picture. This was kind of a long faraway picture of a table with a nice piece of paper of paper over it and the whole cake and record player thing standing and a piece of clay holding up the old broken record arm. What a wonderful opportunity that I was given to assemble the package and write the words for the liner sleeve and do the poster. I chose to credit the artists on the recording sessions that went beyond just the Stones playing the instruments. A first in artist credits for a Rolling Stones album and a first in album detail that has now stood the test of time."



Poster inserted with earliest releases

ROLLING STONES/LET IT BLEED

Side One

GIMMIE SHELTER (4:30)
LOVE IN VAIN (4:18)
COUNTRY HONK (3:00)
LIVE WITH ME (3:35)
LET IT BLEED (5:27)

HARD KNOX AND DURTY SOX

GIMMIE SHELTER

Vocals: Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Mary Clayton
Guitars: Keith Richards
Drums: Charlie Watts
Bass: Bill Wyman
Percussion: Jimmy Miller
Harp: Mick Jagger
Piano: Nicky Hopkins

LOVE IN VAIN

Vocal: Mick Jagger
Guitars: Keith Richards
Drums: Charlie Watts
Bass: Bill Wyman
Mandolin: Ry Cooder

COUNTRY HONK

Vocals: Mick Jagger, Nanette Newman, Keith Richards
Acoustic Guitar: Keith Richards
Slide Guitar: Mick Taylor
Drums: Charlie Watts
Fiddle: Byron Berline

LIVE WITH ME

Vocals: Mick Jagger
Guitars: Mick Taylor, Keith Richards
Drums: Charlie Watts
Bass: Keith Richards
Piano: Leon Russell, Nicky Hopkins
Tenor Sax: Bobby Keys
Horns: Arranged by Leon Russell

LET IT BLEED

Vocals: Mick Jagger
Guitars: Keith Richards
Drums: Charlie Watts
Bass: Bill Wyman
Piano: Ian Stewart
Autoharp: Bill Wyman

ALL SELECTIONS WRITTEN BY MICK JAGGER & KEITH RICHARDS
PUBLISHED BY GIDEON MUSIC INC. (BMI)

except

Love in Vain—Written By Woody Payne
Published by Noma Music Inc.; Nice Songs (BMI)

PRODUCED BY JIMMY MILLER

MANUFACTURED BY NANKER PHELGE MUSIC LTD.
AN ABKCO RECORD COMPANY
Distributed by London Records, Inc.

NPS:4

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

Side Two

MIDNIGHT RAMBLER (6:52)
YOU GOT THE SILVER (2:51)
MONKEY MAN (4:12)
YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT (7:28)

MIDNIGHT RAMBLER

Vocals and Harp: Mick Jagger
Guitars: Keith Richards
Drums: Charlie Watts
Percussion: Brian Jones
Bass: Bill Wyman

YOU GOT THE SILVER

Vocals: Keith Richards
Guitars: Keith Richards
Drums: Charlie Watts
Autoharp: Brian Jones
Bass: Bill Wyman
Piano: Nicky Hopkins
Organ: Nicky Hopkins

MONKEY MAN

Vocals: Mick Jagger, Keith Richards
Guitars: Keith Richards
Piano: Nicky Hopkins
Drums: Charlie Watts
Bass: Bill Wyman
Tambourine: Jimmy Miller
Vibes: Bill Wyman

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT

Vocals: Mick Jagger
Guitars: Keith Richards
Drums: Jimmy Miller
Bass: Bill Wyman
Piano: Al Kooper
French Horn: Al Kooper
Organ: Al Kooper

With The London Bach Choir

and

Madelaine Bell,

Doris Troy,

Nanette Newman

Choral Arrangements: Jack Nitzche

Percussion: Rocky Dijon

BOYS IN THE BACK ROOM

CHIEF ENGINEER: GLYN JOHNS

Assistant Engineers: Bruce Botnick, Jerry Hansen
also: George Chiantz alias "Irish O' Dury"

Tape Operators: Keith, Steve, Dave

Tea and Sympathy: "Jock"

Cover & Liner Design: Robert Brownjohn

Photo: Don McAllester

Sleeve & Poster Design: Victor Kahn

THIS RECORD SHOULD BE PLAYED LOUD

Let It Bleed inner sleeve

The London Bach Choir, who sang on "You Can't Always Get What You Want" are identified among the credits. The Choir later distanced themselves from their contribution and had their name blotted out from the sleeve. Paint it black, they must have said, at Decca/London. This was apparently due to the album's "relentless drug ambience." Later pressings totally removed reference to the Choir from the sleeve. By the time the album was rereleased the Choir was over its snit and was pleased to be referenced once again.



Liner notes blackout of London Bach Choir as seen on stonesondecca.com

Let It Bleed was a masterpiece. Some say it was Keith's first and last masterpiece. Every song on the set list has been played live on tour. Brian Jones performed on only two tracks. He played autoharp on "You

The *Let It Bleed* cover regularly features in polls of the greatest sleeves of all time and was chosen for a set of Royal Mail stamps depicting classic album covers in 2010.

Got the Silver" and percussion on "Midnight Rambler." Likewise, Mick Taylor, appears on just two tracks, "Country Honk" and "Live with Me." Most of the guitar parts were recorded by Keith who also played bass on two tracks and sang his first solo lead vocal on a Rolling Stones recording with "You Got the Silver." It is only appropriate, then, that

Keith played the lead role in establishing the cover art for this album. It was Keith's friend who designed the art and Keith who pushed the project through. Times were beginning to become tumultuous for the Stones. Let it bleed, indeed.

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